

Information on Legionellosis/Legionnaires' Disease



What is Legionnaires' disease?

A type of bacteria called *Legionella* causes Legionnaires' (Lee-juh-nares) disease. The bacteria got its name in 1976, when many people who went to a Philadelphia convention of the American Legion suffered from an outbreak of this disease, a type of pneumonia (lung infection). Although this type of bacteria was around before 1976, more illness from Legionnaires' disease is being detected now. This is because we are now looking for this disease whenever a patient has pneumonia.

Each year, between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease in the U.S. However, many infections are not diagnosed or reported, so this number may be higher. More illness is usually found in the summer and early fall, but it can happen any time of year.

What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease can have symptoms like many other forms of pneumonia, so it can be hard to diagnose at first. Signs of the disease can include: a high fever, chills, and a cough. Some people may also suffer from muscle aches and headaches. Chest X-rays are needed to find the pneumonia caused by the bacteria, and other tests can be done on sputum (phlegm), as well as blood or urine to find evidence of the bacteria in the body.

These symptoms usually begin 2 to 14 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

How serious is it? What is the treatment?

Legionnaires' disease can be very serious and can cause death in up to 5% to 30% of cases. Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics.

Where do *Legionella* bacteria come from?

The *Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. The bacteria grow best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems, or parts of the air-conditioning systems of large buildings. They do not seem to grow in car or window air-conditioners.

How do people get Legionnaires' disease?

People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) that has been contaminated with the bacteria. One example might be from breathing in the steam from a whirlpool spa that has not been properly cleaned and disinfected.

The bacteria are NOT spread from one person to another person.

Who gets this disease?

People most at risk of getting sick from the bacteria are older people (usually 65 years of age or older), as well as people who are smokers, or those who have a chronic lung disease (like emphysema).

People who have weak immune systems from diseases like cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure are also more likely to get sick from *Legionella* bacteria. People who take drugs to suppress (weaken) the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy) are also at higher risk.

What should I do if I think I was exposed to *Legionella* bacteria?

Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill. If you have reason to believe you were exposed to the bacteria, talk to your doctor or local health department. Be sure to mention if you have traveled in the last two weeks.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 14, 2006

If you have additional questions, please call your doctor or local health department.

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